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~~Secret~~*Power struggles in Saigon*

# The CIA and the Government of Ngo Dinh Diem

**Thomas L. Ahern, Jr.**

*When the First Indochina War ended with the Geneva Accords of 20 July 1954, the Eisenhower Administration decided to assume the French burden of preventing the advance of Communism in Southeast Asia. In practice, this meant trying to build a nation-state south of the 17th parallel that could defend itself against Ho Chi Minh and the North. The question of Vietnamese leadership had already been decided: at US instigation and with French concurrence, Ngo Dinh Diem had become Prime Minister in early July, and the American task was to help him consolidate his control in a situation that appeared to favor an eventual victory by Hanoi.*

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*As the Geneva Accords came into effect, CIA had already established itself with the new government. Two independent stations represented the Agency in Saigon: the Saigon Military Station headed by Col. Edward Lansdale, and the regular Station [redacted] Lansdale had introduced himself to Diem, and Paul Harwood, chief of covert action in the regular Station, had already known Ngo Dinh Nhu, Diem's brother, for several months. The Embassy, essentially French-oriented, was treating the Ngo brothers with some reserve, and Lansdale and Harwood quickly became the principal channels of political information and influence between the two governments.*

*Diem's early opponents were not the quiescent Communists but a variety of religious and bandit groups, abetted by the Francophile command of Diem's own Army. Paris was quickly alienated by Diem's stubborn independence; on the American side, Gen. J. Lawton Collins, Eisenhower's personal representative, soon despaired of Diem's ability to govern. In these unpropitious circumstances, the two Stations did their best to fulfill their mandate from*

*Headquarters by helping Diem fend off his opponents. These efforts had a significant, perhaps decisive effect, during Diem's early months in office, but by March 1955 armed rebellion looked imminent, and Ambassador Collins was advocating that the US look for someone to replace Diem. The following excerpt from The CIA and the Government of Ngo Dinh Diem, a forthcoming CIA History Staff volume, describes what happened from then until early May 1955.*

Lansdale had become involved with several religious sect leaders in September 1954. Undertaken at Diem's request, these contacts included the autonomous Cao Dai leader, Trinh Minh The; Gen. Nguyen Thanh Phuong, commander of the regular Cao Dai forces; and two Hoa Hao generals. Except for the early payment to The, Diem asked Lansdale for no material support, saying in one case that he merely wanted Lansdale "to teach (Hoa Hao General) Ngo how to earn the love and affection of his people."<sup>1</sup> Whatever Diem's concern for the general's popularity, he must also have intended his choice of Lansdale as middleman to demonstrate to the sects his command of American support.

## Maneuvering and Mediating

The sect leaders were fully aware of the weakness of Diem's position and, with the exception of The, withheld any commitment to the new government. But as 1954 drew to a close, they grew anxious about the impending termination of French subsidies to their armed forces. If these units were neither integrated into the Vietnamese Army nor paid off upon demobilization, their leaders' authority would suffer. The French still controlled the Army payroll

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and the national treasury. When their sect payments ended in February 1955, Diem had no funds with which to continue them. One regiment of The's forces was integrated on 13 February, but the future of all the other sect forces and their leaders' political loyalties remained unresolved.<sup>2</sup>

As Lansdale mediated between Diem and The in the weeks before 13 February he was apparently unaware of simultaneous direct negotiations between Nhu and the Cao Dai, although Nhu kept Harwood continuously informed. Harwood was ignorant of Lansdale's role, and neither saw any need to keep the other apprised.<sup>3</sup> As a result, Lansdale viewed his role as more operative than was actually the case. Nevertheless, he served with The, as he did with the Hoa Hao's General Ngo, to provide an American guarantee of Diem's good intentions. At the same time, Lansdale continued to mediate with the other sect leaders, all of them less receptive to government authority than The, Nhu's longtime associate.

With French support of the sect armies coming to an end, Gen. John C. (Iron Mike) O'Daniel, Chief of the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) and French High Commissioner Paul Ely named Lansdale to head a joint Franco-American military team to work out arrangements for their demobilization or integration into the regular Army. Consistently more fearful of a sect rebellion than other Americans on the scene, Lansdale persuaded O'Daniel and Ely to reassure the sect leaders with a mid-March series of briefings on Franco-American plans.<sup>4</sup> Still unpersuaded that their interests would be protected, the sect leaders, including The, formed a United Sects National Front, and issued a manifesto on 21 March giving Diem five days in which, as Lansdale put it, to "clean out his entire government." Otherwise, they "would go to the people."<sup>5</sup>

As the crisis intensified on the evening of 20 March, Lansdale found himself beginning a four-hour session with the Prime Minister. Diem complained about the sects and about his defense minister's presumption in wanting authority to dismiss "undesirable" Army officers. During the next two days, Lansdale shuttled frantically between Diem and the

Cao Dai, assuring Diem that The, at least, was still loyal to the government, despite having signed the manifesto.

Ambassador Collins, whom Lansdale had kept informed, wanted to be helpful and thought he might be able to reassure Cao Dai Generals Phuong and Thc. But at the ensuing meeting, on 22 March, Collins criticized the manifesto and questioned its authors' patriotism. It went so badly that Lansdale felt constrained to ask Collins, at the end of the session, to explain to his visitors that three note-taking American participants were Embassy officials, not journalists.<sup>6</sup>

Lansdale saw Diem the evening of 22 March. Diem was still worried about control of the military and about Collins having told him that Defense Minister Minh was responsible for the Army. Lansdale explained that Collins was actually defining the chain-of-command, and that this had been prompted by Diem ordering troop movements without notifying Minh. Diem asked for an American "job description" of his responsibilities as Prime Minister and Lansdale outlined those of the US President.<sup>7</sup>

As the crisis mounted, Lansdale noticed a strange passivity in Diem's reaction:

Diem does very little constructive planning in such times of stress; or, at least he has not told me his plans. He pays scant attention to such planning, seems eager to continue reporting the events of the day, what Ambassador Collins has termed "crying on my shoulder."<sup>8</sup>

Lansdale tried to fill the gap, suggesting various political and public relations maneuvers that Diem might use to regain the political initiative against the sects. He also tried to mediate the enduring dispute between Diem and General Phuong over pay and subsistence to Cao Dai troops. Of his method in resolving a disagreement over the amount already paid, Lansdale later said that, "As usual, I had checked (the matter) out with both parties, telling them that I preferred taking such matters up openly rather than going behind their backs."<sup>9</sup>

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### Resort to Force

On 29 March, after a week of inconclusive maneuvering, Phuong and The came to Lansdale, claiming that a Hoa Hao-Binh Xuyen *coup de force* was imminent. They sounded-out Lansdale about getting Phuong's troops integrated into the national Army to prevent their being suborned by the anti-Diem Cao Dai pope, Pham Ngoc Tac; Lansdale undertook to discuss it with Collins.

At the same time, Diem was telling the French that he was about to use the Army to take over the National Police headquarters. General Ely pressured him into postponing an attack, but the Binh Xuyen preempted the issue that night, opening fire on Army posts in Saigon. Mortar rounds landed on the Palace grounds, and Lansdale wanted to go to Diem for firsthand reporting of developments. General O'Daniel, apparently concerned for Lansdale's safety, refused to let him go.<sup>10</sup>

As usual, there had been no coordination between Stations, and Lansdale did not know that Harwood was at the Palace when the mortar rounds fell, watching as Diem's artillery leveled a house across from the Palace grounds from which some sniper fire had come. Harwood had been at the Palace almost daily during the crisis, debriefing Nhu and on Collins's behalf urging Diem to refrain from deploying the Army against the Binh Xuyen. On 29 March, he was there to check out a French report of an Army advance toward Binh Xuyen territory in Cholon. Diem gave assurances that he had made no such move and did not intend to do so.<sup>11</sup>

Lansdale was horrified to find, the next morning, that Ely had used the threat of French armed intervention to impose a cease-fire, and that Collins supported him. Lansdale protested that "the French Army in effect was assuming a role which made Saigon a protectorate." Collins disagreed, insisting that the French role was only that of mediator. Diem saw it as Lansdale did, and he complained that Ely had proclaimed himself "commander in chief." But Ely and Collins prevailed, at least for the moment. In one development that gratified Lansdale, Diem and General Phuong agreed that day, 30 March, to

integrate 8,000 more Cao Dai troops into the national Army, thus denying them to the sects' dissident United Front.<sup>12</sup>

### Nhu's Negotiations

Meanwhile, Nhu kept Harwood informed of his own efforts to defuse the crisis. While Diem was again using Lansdale as his emissary to Trinh Minh The, Nhu continued his personal negotiations with The and Phuong. A Station report of 29 March, apparently from Nhu, described a meeting at which The agreed to withdraw from the sects' United Front and Phuong undertook to leave the cabinet. The two Cao Dai generals performed as promised, and Nhu's authority as both negotiator and reporting source was accordingly enhanced.<sup>13</sup> While the Embassy was reporting that the rest of the cabinet was about to quit, Harwood told Washington that it wouldn't: Nhu had said that none of its members had the fortitude to confront Diem with a resignation. None did, and they all stayed, at least for the time being.<sup>14</sup>

### Showdown Averted

On 31 March, probably at French instigation, Bao Dai sent Diem a reproachful telegram from his retreat in Cannes. It deplored the bloodshed—there had been a hundred or so casualties—and obliquely suggested that Diem resign. (The Emperor sent it twice, once in the clear to ensure that Diem's enemies were kept informed.)

Ely and Collins maintained their pressure on Diem not to act against the Binh Xuyen, and the Prime Minister was reduced to asking Lansdale whether this meant that the French and the Americans were planning to depose him. Lansdale assured him to the contrary, but could offer no help when Diem complained of the corrosive effect on his authority of the enforced standoff. But Lansdale could at least ensure that the Vietnamese perception of events was conveyed to Washington. The day after the French prevented a showdown with the Binh Xuyen, he spent three and half hours in the prime-ministerial bedroom, debriefing people sent in to him by Diem.<sup>15</sup>

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### Defense Minister Quits

During this phase of the crisis, Defense Minister Ho Thong Minh resigned over Diem's refusal to guarantee prior consultation with the cabinet before moving against the Binh Xuyen. Collins thought this an example of Diem's inability to manage people of independent views, and he reacted by threatening Diem with the withdrawal of US support if Minh were not retained. Minh left the cabinet anyway, and on 31 March Collins intimated to Washington that he had given up. Diem, he said, had had a "fair chance" to set up a working government, but had "produced little if anything of a constructive nature."<sup>16</sup> Lansdale, meanwhile, complained to Headquarters that he thought Collins destructively inconsistent in criticizing Diem for passivity while preventing him from curbing the Binh Xuyen, the single most immediate threat to the government's authority.<sup>17</sup>

### Lansdale Versus Collins

Lansdale's major points of disagreement with Collins were the morale of the Army and the sincerity of Cao Dai Generals Phuong and The, who simultaneously professed loyalty to Diem and trafficked with the anti-Diem leadership of the sects' United Front. Lansdale and the regular Station, supported by the MAAG and the military attaché, thought the Army could whip the Binh Xuyen, and Lansdale was certain of the good faith of his Cao Dai interlocutors. Collins was doubtful on both counts. Despite being discouraged by the State Department from exploring alternatives to Diem, he wrote John Foster Dulles on 7 April that "my judgment is that Diem does not have the capacity . . . to prevent this country from falling under Communist control."<sup>18</sup>

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Fearing that Collins would object to the proposal, Lansdale asked Headquarters to approve it without ambassadorial coordination. Washington sympathized with his dilemma, but insisted that Collins be consulted. As it turned out, Collins readily approved the idea. At that point, however, John Foster Dulles had already endorsed a suggestion

from the CIA's Deputy Director for Plans, Frank Wisner, to postpone final word to the Station until Washington could discuss the plan directly with the Ambassador, who was to be recalled for consultations on Diem's political future. Lansdale, meanwhile, was to temporize if Diem pressed him on the matter.<sup>20</sup>

Apprehensive about the line that Collins would take in Washington, Lansdale cabled the DCI asking for permission to accompany the Ambassador to Washington. The reply, from Wisner, turned him down, but urged him to try to prevent a damaging rejection by Diem of Collins's latest recommendations for government appointments. Lansdale spent the two days before Collins's 20 April departure shuttling between the Palace and the Embassy, but he was unable to prevent what he saw as a fundamental misunderstanding between Diem and Collins.

The result was that Collins left for Washington persuaded that Diem would take only sycophantic yes-men into the cabinet, whereas Lansdale thought Diem was insisting merely that they be "anticolonialist honest courageous men."<sup>21</sup> Lansdale seems to have been taking Diem at his word, while Collins, who never questioned Diem's sincerity, had the better appreciation for what this formula would mean in practice.

### Difficulties with Nhu

Harwood was experiencing the same problem with Nhu that Lansdale confronted with Diem. On 21 April 1955, just after Collins's departure, Harwood predicted to Headquarters that, at an impending discussion of the police problem, Nhu would ask why Diem was being prevented from asserting control of his own government. Harwood had already received Nhu's letter protesting Collins's latest effort at cabinet broadening. Noting that Collins had acknowledged consulting other Vietnamese on a reorganized government, Nhu insisted that compliance by Diem meant "the negation of the whole revolutionary ideal . . . and the realization of a regime like that of Chiang Kai-shek, ending in a Viet Minh victory, they alone being capable of sweeping away all this rot."<sup>22</sup>

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### Adversarial Relations

This apocalyptic vision of the results of a non-Communist coalition illustrates the perceptual gap, in the matter of defining a legitimate authority for South Vietnam, that already separated the Ngo brothers from their American sponsors. Diem had once written that "a sacred respect is due to the person of the sovereign. . . . He is the mediator between the people and the Heaven as he celebrates the national cult."<sup>23</sup> In the midst of the struggle with the sects, Diem and Nhu seem to have seen their mission in terms both mystical and proprietary. The Americans, on the other hand, might be divided as to tactics, but all saw the task as one of trying to reconcile the various anti-Communist interests while holding off the Viet Minh and beginning the construction of a popularly based government.

The divergence of American opinion at the tactical level, which persisted until the eve of the coup in 1963, resulted in a relationship with Diem that was adversarial at two levels. First was the opposition of the US officials who thought Diem incapable of succeeding and wanted him replaced. The second level arose from the tension between Diem and those Americans who saw him as the only candidate for leadership of an anti-Communist South Vietnam, but wanted him to accept their views of the institutional form it should take.

Both CIA Stations saw the weaknesses in Diem's leadership, and Harwood in particular had already experienced one confrontation. But neither he nor Lansdale saw any alternative. As Ambassador Collins left for Washington, both remained committed to helping Diem survive.

### Publicity Flap

Collins's departure for Washington on 20 April launched the most fateful episode in CIA's relationship with the Diem government. It also illustrated both Collins's tangled relations with CIA and the Agency's capacity at that time to exploit the US media for support of political action. In Hong Kong, while en route, the Ambassador picked up a copy of *Life* magazine with a cover photo of a triumphal

Diem reception in Central Vietnam. The photograph and accompanying story had resulted from a Lansdale initiative that Wisner took to *Time/Life* in January. He gave the editors a background paper, and they undertook to publish a feature on Diem's growing political stature in Free Vietnam.<sup>24</sup>

Collins arrived in Washington outraged by this publicity for what he regarded as a lost cause. He told an interdepartmental meeting that Diem had no popular following. The photo was faked, he insisted, probably by Harwood, and CIA was "slanting its reports." Wisner responded that he understood Diem to have scored a genuine public relations triumph, and Collins "practically called (him) a liar."<sup>25</sup>

Wisner promptly asked the Station for its side of the story. The thrust of its reply was that money could not buy the popular feeling so evident in the photograph (the Station had, in fact, given Nhu \$1,700 to help prepare Diem's reception). Wisner later told Harwood that he had read the cable to a subsequent session of the same interdepartmental committee, with some consequent damage to Collins's credibility in Washington. Collins apparently had forgotten his own approval of the *Time/Life* project, given to Wisner in Washington in early February and confirmed in Honolulu on his way back to Saigon.<sup>26</sup> Harwood thought Collins's apparent forgetfulness may have represented a fundamental lack of interest in the covert action program. The Ambassador, throughout his tenure in Saigon, never asked for a briefing on it.<sup>27</sup>

### Ambassador's Concerns

With or without a formal briefing, Collins had already decided that CIA officers in Saigon enjoyed too much freedom of action. State Department records hold a memorandum by Deputy Chief of Mission Randolph Kidder noting that the Ambassador had "directed that (CIA) will not undertake . . . new programs in Vietnam without previous consultation" with him, and with Kidder and the political counselor. "Furthermore, (CIA) will periodically review" current activity with these officials. According to Kidder, Allen Dulles sent George

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Aurell to Saigon in February 1955 to "discuss the above decision with Ambassador Collins. No change in the Ambassador's directive was made."<sup>28</sup>

Collins had not shared with CIA in Saigon his 7 April 1955 recommendation to State that Diem be replaced. CIA Headquarters, presumably aware of it at least after the mid-April meeting that discussed Collins's recall, was also silent. As Collins prepared to leave, Lansdale wanted to know how he should respond to the anticipated probing by Diem as to American intentions. Collins told him to assure the Prime Minister of continued US support. The Ambassador's well-known differences with Diem rendered this guarantee somewhat suspect, and Lansdale was uneasy. But for the first week of Collins's absence he had no choice but to feign optimism in his dealings with Diem.<sup>29</sup>

### **Renewed Tension**

In the last week of April, tension with the Binh Xuyen mounted once more. In an almost exact reprise of the events of late March, Diem told Lansdale of his intention to remove Lai Van Sang, the chief of the National Police; the same information came from Nhu via Harwood. This time, Collins was not around to object, and Diem acted, on 26 April, without informing the French. He appointed a new security chief and set up a headquarters for him outside the sector controlled by the French Army. The rumor mill continued to predict French and American defection from the Diemist cause, and Lansdale begged Headquarters for authority to assure Diem and other Vietnamese officials of Washington's continuing commitment.

This elicited a reply from DCI Allen Dulles urging restraint on Diem and pointing out that any assurances of the kind Lansdale wanted would be sent through the chargé d'affaires, Randolph Kidder. In any case, Dulles said, no assurances of any sort could be given until the conclusion of deliberations then being conducted "at the highest level," and "you should be prepared for (the) possibility that this might involve some changes in relations to Diem."<sup>30</sup>

This cautionary word reflected General Collins's formidable presence in Washington. The contretemps over the *Life* cover story may have tarnished Collins's credibility, but the Ambassador had two advantages in the debate over what to do about Diem. One was the strength of his conviction of Diem's incapacity. The other was his status as personal representative of the President. The title was designed to meet the peculiarity of his accreditation to both the Diem government and the French, but it accurately reflected his relationship with President Eisenhower.

Within a few days of his arrival in Washington, Collins had prevailed on the President and a reluctant Secretary of State to start working with the French and Bao Dai to find a replacement for Diem. On 27 April, at the close of the working day, three cables went to the Embassy in Paris with instructions on the way to broach the subject with the French.<sup>31</sup>

### **Backing for Diem**

As State was telling Paris how to begin preparing Diem's removal, an uninformed but suspicious Lansdale was looking for a way to forestall just such a move. By 27 April, he had sounded out the members of the country team and confirmed that all, including chargé d'affaires Kidder, thought Diem could beat the Binh Xuyen.<sup>32</sup> Early on the 28th (at the close of business on the 27th in Washington), he asked Kidder to authorize the country team members to let their respective headquarters have their views, but Kidder declined, saying that Collins already knew them.

Lansdale then turned to the regular Station, and by 0900 they had a joint cable on its way, telling Headquarters that it was the "considered opinion" of CIA in Saigon that Diem had a better chance to succeed than any prospective replacement; failure to support him would doom any successor government and benefit only the Viet Minh. The message added that information just received and being passed to Kidder warranted a country-team estimate and suggested that the DCI ask the Department of State to request one from Saigon.<sup>33</sup>

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Part of what the State Department later called "a flood of reports and recommendations" from Lansdale, this cable arrived at Headquarters on the evening of 27 April, local time. Along with the other reports, it provoked:

a series of telephone calls from... (George) Aurell to (Archibald) Roosevelt (acting for Wisner), to Allen Dulles, to (Undersecretary) Hoover, to the Secretary, to (Director of Philippine and Southeast Asian Affairs) Ken Young. The result was a stay order on Paris not "to embark on the course of action agreed to late yesterday afternoon."<sup>34</sup>

### **Another Attack**

While the State Department was putting a hold on preparations to replace Diem, Headquarters asked Saigon for more details on events there. By the time the request arrived, the replay of the late March crisis was resuming. Shortly after noon on the 28th, mortar rounds again exploded on the Palace grounds.

Diem called General Ely to protest—the fire seemed to be coming from the Binh Xuyen in an area protected by the French—while his secretary was on another line, giving Lansdale a running account of the firing and of the argument with Ely. As another round landed nearby, Diem told Ely he was ordering the Army to return fire, and hung up. His secretary relayed this to Lansdale, and then also hung up.<sup>35</sup>

Some students of early US involvement in Vietnam have believed that Lansdale, anxious to block any move in Washington to abandon Diem, encouraged the Prime Minister to challenge the Binh Xuyen, and that it was the Army that fired first. Lansdale probably did not try to persuade Diem to avoid a showdown, but as far as his interpreter, Joe Redick, could later recall, he said nothing to incite one, either.<sup>36</sup> The provenance of the first rounds thus remains uncertain.

Lansdale's team and the regular Station spent the next two days keeping Washington abreast of Diem's progress against the insurrection. Lansdale concentrated on Diem, other contacts at the Palace, and

Trinh Minh The. Harwood, meanwhile, debriefed Nhu, getting from him copies of reports prepared for Diem by the chief of the Army's intelligence service. Since the fighting in late March, the regular Station had been in almost ~~near~~ (b)(1) contact with an agent in the Binh Xuyen; (b)(3)(n) he was in a position to provide ~~alternative~~ tactical information. Harwood passed much of this to Nhu for use by the Army.<sup>37</sup>

On 29 April, the State Department asked for the country team estimate suggested by CIA in Saigon, and Kidder's reply confirmed the optimistic assessment of Diem's chances sent the day before by the two CIA Stations.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, the Vietnamese Army, supported by The's Cao Dai troops, seized the initiative. The Hoa Hao hung back, watching as their Binh Xuyen allies went on the defensive.<sup>39</sup> The confidence in Diem and the Army voiced by Lansdale and the country team seemed about to be vindicated.

### **Order from Bao Dai**

At this point, Diem showed Lansdale a second telegram from Bao Dai. No longer content with the veiled threat of late March, Bao Dai now ordered Diem and his Army chief of staff to Paris. Diem was to turn over the Army to Gen. Nguyen Van Vy, a French citizen and supporter of the former Chief of Staff and would-be mutineer, General Hinh. Diem told Lansdale that the Army and the loyal Cao Dai refused to accept Vy's authority and that they wanted Diem to endorse their intended repudiation of the emperor.<sup>40</sup> Diem wanted to know if the US would accept this.

Lansdale's description of the incident does not refer to any consultation with Headquarters or the chargé d'affaires. It says he responded that Washington "would accept a legal action, but that dethronement by voice vote... such as that described by Diem was hardly a legal proceeding."<sup>41</sup> At the same time, as recounted later in his book, Lansdale encouraged Diem to defy the emperor's order to report to him in France. He pictures Diem in an agony of indecision over the conflict between imperial authority and the national interest, a conflict that Lansdale implies he helped him resolve. "Slowly, painfully," they came

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to the conclusion that if Diem left, "there would be no moral basis upon which the government could govern . . . freedom would founder."

In fact, Nhu had already told Harwood that Diem would ignore the order, and Diem did so, though he also resisted sect pressure formally to repudiate the emperor. Chargé d'affaires Kidder, to whom Diem also described his dilemma, adopted a more neutral stance, saying that the Prime Minister would have to bear full responsibility for any defiance of imperial command.<sup>42</sup>

### **Victory for Diem**

Diem's decision to stand fast deprived General Vy of any resources except that portion of the Imperial Guard still loyal to Bao Dai. These modest forces were enough to provoke near-chaos, even as the Army battled with the Binh Xuyen for control of the city. While the pro-Diem Cao Dai were trying to arrest General Vy, Vy's Imperial Guard arrested, then released, Diem loyalists, including the Army Chief of Staff. According to Lansdale's account, Col. Tran Van Don then somehow persuaded Vy to trick the French into delivering armored vehicles they had been withholding from the Vietnamese. Vy turned them over to the Army, which promptly deployed them against the Binh Xuyen.<sup>43</sup>

Whatever the contribution of Vy's armored vehicles, Diem's Army made short work of the Binh Xuyen. By noon on 30 April, the rebels had been driven from Saigon and all but a few isolated strongpoints in Cholon.<sup>44</sup> The Binh Xuyen and the Hoa Hao retained some nuisance value for another year, but without serious French support they no longer presented a real threat.

### **Washington Reacts**

An Agency officer then in Washington later recalled that on a weekend afternoon, presumably either Saturday, 30 April, or Sunday, 1 May, Allen Dulles and Frank Wisner took the latest reporting on the battle for Saigon to John Foster Dulles's house.

Diem was holding his own against the Binh Xuyen, it said, and people were rallying to him.

The DCI and Wisner argued that this was the wrong moment to fulfill President Eisenhower's commitment to Collins to look for a Diem replacement. The Secretary of State agreed and, with his visitors still present, telephoned the President. He summarized the Agency reporting, and recommended postponing the intended withdrawal of US support. In Collins's absence—he was already on the way back to Saigon—Eisenhower concurred.

As the meeting ended, an aide announced the arrival of French Ambassador Couve de Murville, and the Secretary of State assured his departing visitors that "he would take care of the French." On the afternoon of 1 May, with Collins still en route to Saigon, a State Department telegram to the Embassy reaffirmed the US commitment to Ngo Dinh Diem.<sup>45</sup>

### **Questions of Influence**

Information from Lansdale's sources was a small, though certainly significant, part of the reporting that persuaded President Eisenhower to reverse his decision to abandon Ngo Dinh Diem. Most of this product was acquired by the officers of the regular Station. Allen Dulles, however, treated it all as emanating from Lansdale, whom he had personally selected for the Saigon assignment, and whom he regarded as the Agency's preeminent authority on Vietnam. Wittingly or otherwise, Lansdale lent that authority to the reporting of the regular Station and, in so doing, became the largest single influence on deliberations in Washington at the most critical point of Diem's tenure before 1963.<sup>46</sup>

More generally, the episode illustrates one of the salient features of the Agency's relationship with Ngo Dinh Diem, namely, that CIA exercised its influence much more effectively on Diem's behalf than on Diem himself. He seems never to have acted in the spirit of quid pro quo, but rather as one entitled to the satisfaction of his demands by the justice of his cause and by the US interest in seeing him succeed.

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Diem undoubtedly never learned the details of the Agency's operative role in arranging the suspension of State's instructions to Paris, and then persuading the Secretary of State and the President to rescind their commitment to Collins to abandon him. But he would certainly have regarded this service as no more than his due.

### **Decisive Support**

It is not certain that without CIA support Diem would have been forced from office. He still had committed backers on Capitol Hill. Senator Mike Mansfield had threatened to cut aid to Vietnam if Diem were replaced, and Congresswoman Edna Kelly of New York spoke for many on the House Foreign Affairs Committee in opposing withdrawal of US support for him. And two influential State Department officials—Walter Robertson, Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs, and Kenneth Young, Director of the Office of Philippine and Southeast Asian Affairs—were unpersuaded by Collins's arguments; they saw no viable alternative to Diem. John Foster Dulles, less committed to Diem than any of these, had always questioned whether anyone better was to be found. And Diem's success against the Binh Xuyen would have strengthened his supporters' hand even without help from CIA.<sup>47</sup>

But negotiations with Paris, once under way, might have acquired momentum of their own. With a foot in the door, the French would have fought hard to bring Diem down, and Ambassador Collins would probably have supported them, even after the defeat of the Binh Xuyen. The certainty is that CIA, by virtue of Lansdale's advocacy in Saigon and through the exploitation of DCI Allen Dulles's ready access to the Secretary of State, ensured that the issue would not be joined. Doubts about Diem persisted, but the die was cast.

The same combination of goal-oriented action and intellectual objectivity that CIA officers brought to bear on their dealings with Diem and Nhu also produced pioneering work on the operational concepts and the techniques of interagency coordination that later defined the American counterinsurgency effort in Vietnam. All of this taken into account, the

Agency's role in consolidating Diem's hold on the government of South Vietnam remains its most consequential achievement of the Second Indochina War.

### **NOTES**

1. (b)(3)(c) Clandestine Service Historical Program (CSHP) 113, October 1970, *The Saigon Military Mission: June 1954-December 1956*, Vol. II, p. 11 (Secret).
2. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 73. Lansdale reported the troops of this regiment as "pledged . . . to SMM who in turn had insisted that they be loyal to Vietnam" (CSHP 113, Vol. II, p. 26).
3. Harwood interview, 21 June 1990; memorandum from the Special Assistant (Anderson) to the Ambassador (Collins), "Confidential Funds Project," 25 March 1955, AN 68A 5159, Box 124, Records Group 84, National Archives and Records Administration, Suitland, MD (hereafter cited as NARA).
4. CSHP 113, Vol. I, pp. 66-68, 73-79.
5. Col. Edward G. Lansdale, CHSP 62, *The Defeat of the Binh Xuyen Sect by the Diem Government*, 10 March-3 April 1955, 15 April 1955, p. 6 (Secret).
6. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 9.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 12-15.
11. Harwood interview, 21 June 1990.
12. CSHP 62, pp. 14-15, 17.
13. Intelligence Report CS PD454, 29 March 1955, (b)(1) (b)(3)(c)

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14. Harwood interview, 17 October 1989.
15. CSHP 62, pp. 18, 22-27.
16. J. Lawton Collins, telegrams to Department of State, 29 and 31 March 1955, FRUS, 1955-57, I, Vietnam, pp. 158, 169.
17. SAIG 6517, 20 April 1955, cited in CSHP 113, Vol. 1, p. 101.
18. J. Lawton Collins, telegram to Department of State, 7 April 1955, Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1955-57, Vietnam, 1, p. 219.
19. One subse-----able from Lansdale gives the amount as (b)(1) piasters (SAIG 6925, 16 May 1955, (b)(3)(c) (b)(1)) Later, the Station advanced (b)(3)(c)piasters, which was ultimately returned (SAIG 8226, 29 August 1955, (b)(3)(c)) Redick interview, 28 September 1989.
20. CSHP 113, Vol. I, pp. 95-97. The whole thing came to naught when Diem concluded that the authors of the idea could not produce. He returned the money in late August, but used Lansdale as intermediary in unproductive negotiations until shortly before Ba Cut was captured in April 1956 (b)(3)(c)
21. CSHP 113, Vol. I, pp. 97-98; SAIG 6517, 20 April 1955, quoted in CHSP 113, Vol. 1, p. 100.
22. SAIG 6523, 21 April 1955, (b)(3)(c)
23. Nguyen Thai, "The Government of Men in the Republic of Vietnam" (thesis, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, 1962), quoted in Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake*, p. 109.
24. Deputy Director for Plans, memorandum for (b)(3)(c) Support Assistant to the DDP, "Proposed Time Magazine Cover Story on Diem," 2 February 1955, (b)(1) (b)(3)(c)
25. Harwood interview, 17 October 1989; John Caswell, interview, 13 December 1963 (b)(3)(c) 2(b)(1) 22 April 1955; (b)(3)(c) (b)(3)(c) Harwood interview, 17 October 1989; unsigned memorandum, "Significant Travel by Premier Diem Outside Saigon Area," 24 April 19(b)(1) (b)(3)(c)
27. Harwood interview, 16 May 1990.
28. Randolph Kidder, memorandum for the record, untitled, 11 March 1955, AN 68A 5159, Box 124, RG 84, NARA.
29. Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, pp. 276-277.
30. Special Assistant (Anderson), Memorandum for the Ambassador (Collins), untitled, 25 March 1955, AN 68A 5159, Box 124, RG 84, NARA; CHSP 113, Vol. I, pp. 101-102. The quotation is from (b)(3)(c) 26 April 1955, p. 104.
31. FRUS, 1955-57, I, Vietnam, pp. 294-299.
32. CSHP 113, Vol. I, p. 38; Randolph Kidder, interview by Thomas Ahern, Washington, DC, 22 January 1990 (hereafter cited as Kidder interview, 22 January 1990).
33. CSHP 113, Vol. I, p. 40; SAIG 6635, 28 April 1955, of which a retyped copy is filed in (b)(3)(c)
34. Deputy Special Assistant for Intelligence, Department of State, untitled memorandum, 28 April 1955, FRUS, 1955-57, Vietnam, Vol. 1, pp. 305-306. The "stay" order is reprinted on p. 301.
35. CSHP 113, Vol. I, pp. 105-106.
36. Joseph Redick, interview by Thomas Ahern, Staunton, VA, 22 January 1991 (hereafter cited as Redick interview, 22 January 1991).

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37. CSHP 113, Vol. II, p. 41; [ ] (b)(3)(c)  
 [ ] Magill interview, 24 October  
 1989.
38. CSHP 113, Vol. I, pp. 106-107.
39. CSHP 113, Vol. II, p. 4.
40. CSHP 113, Vol. I, p. 108. As was often the case, Nhu was simultaneously giving Harwood what Diem was telling Lansdale. The same information, attributed to a source described in terms that fit Nhu, is contained in SAIG 6659, 29 April 1955, [ ] (b)(1)  
 [ ] (b)(3)(c)
41. CHSP 113, Vol. II, pp. 44-45.
42. SAIG 6678, 29 April 1955, [ ] (b)(3)(c)  
 [ ] Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*,  
 p. 299; FRUS, 1955-57, Vietnam, Vol. I, p. 318.
43. CHSP 113, Vol. II, pp. 42-43; Memorandum, S/S [Fisher Howe] to The Secretary [John Foster Dulles], "French Aid to Anti-Government Elements in South Vietnam," 6 May 1955, citing ARMA [Army Attaché] Report 982, 2 May 1955, Decimal File 75I Goo/5-255, RG 59, NARA.
44. CHSP 113, Vol. II, p. 43.
45. John Foster Dulles, telegram to Embassy Saigon, 1 May 1955, US Department of State, FRUS, 2955-57, Vietnam, Vol. I, p. 344; Caswell interview, 27 February 1990. Caswell described his presence at the meeting as that of "someone who can pronounce the names."
46. Caswell interview, 27 February 1990.
47. Kenneth Young, Memorandum to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, 30 April 1955, FRUS, 1955-57, Vietnam, Vol. I, pp. 337-339.

*This article is SECRET.*~~Secret~~